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The Nation's Danger and the Nation's Duty.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN ST. JOHN'S PARISH, PASSAIC, NEW-JERSEY,
ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, APRIL 21ST, 1861.

BY THE

REV. M. B. SMITH, A.M.,

RECTOR ELECT.

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

NEW-YORK:

JOHN A. GRAY, PRINTER, STEREOTYPY, AND BINDER,
FIRE-PROOF BUILDINGS,
CORNER OF FRANKFORT AND JACOB STREETS.

1861.



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THE NATION'S DANGER AND THE NATION'S DUTY.



“O THOU sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still. How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge against Ashkelon, and against the sea-shore? There hath he appointed it.”—JEREMIAH 47 : 6, 7.

To the devout Christian heart there is nothing more revolting in the history of a nation's life than war. It is one of those calamities which all should devoutly pray to have averted. The history of war is a record of cruelty and evil over which the Christian reader instinctively shudders as he reads. Its horrors are portrayed in vivid colors in the word of God, and uninspired history is tinged with its bloody stain. What Christian is there here to-day, or who is there in all the host of God's elect—be he a member of whatsoever branch of the Church visible and catholic—who is not ready, in view of this calamity, to use the language of the first clause of the text: “*O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still?*” Brethren, we should all devoutly pray for the advent of that day of mil

lennial peace and glory, long ago predicted by the prophet of Israel, in which "*Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*" (Micah 4 : 3.) Yet, abhorrent as war may be, and no doubt is, to each one of us, there is little doubt that it often is, in the hands of God, a mighty instrument for effecting his sovereign purposes in the world.

If you demand the proof of this, I point you to the history of Israel—the Church of the Old Testament; the history of the reformed churches of continental Europe; the history of our own nation and of Italy, so long the slave either of civil despots or of a corrupt and overbearing and exacting hierarchy. In all these struggles the hand of God has been seen too clearly to admit of doubt on the part of the God-fearing student of history. War is, we admit, a fearful alternative; yet, terrible as are many of its fruits, its results for good often far exceed its cost.

With true Christian feeling, we may recoil from such an issue. We may command the sword to return to its scabbard; yet, brethren, may not the question be asked of us as it was of Israel: "*How can it be quiet, seeing the Lord hath given it a charge against Ashkelon, and against the sea-shore?*" We may say, when we hear of the coming contest, "*Rest, and be still;*" and yet the voice of inspiration speaks to us as it did to Israel, and declares: "*There hath He appointed it.*"

The fact can no longer be concealed, that we are living in troublous times; times in which government is looked upon as a mere figment, and governors as

creatures to whom none are accountable. The great truth so solemnly enunciated in Holy Scripture, that "*The powers that be are ordained of God*," (Rom. 13:1,) seems, as far as many are concerned, to have lost its place in the galaxy of divinely inspired axioms. The sublime idea of the ruler as God's civil representative, and minister for the terror of evil-doers and the praise of them that do well, as the Christian minister is God's representative in things spiritual, has been so frittered away, that all reference of human authority to the great Giver of this power to govern is forgotten.

The right of rebellion, which all history and all time have conceded to the down-trodden and the oppressed, is now claimed by those who have suffered no wrong, have been subjected to no oppression, and whose chief aim is to fasten upon the world, for all generations, a system which has no warrant in Holy Scripture, and is alike repugnant to elevated sentiments of humanity and to the spirit of our blessed religion.

I have seldom introduced such topics as these into the sacred desk, and for this reason I feel assured, my dear people, you will tolerate them on the present occasion, and will acknowledge with me, that in such a crisis as the present an occasional digression from the ordinary routine of pulpit instruction is not only warrantable, but proper and necessary. Whether the ministry do or do not touch upon these topics, the people will. *It* will be ~~the~~ all-absorbing topic. And since such will inevitably be the case, it is the bounden duty of the pulpit to give a right direction, if possible,

to public feeling, and to utter no uncertain sound, in treating of subjects which relate to the very existence of the nation and the rights of the human race.

And what, brethren, are the causes of this unwonted interest on subjects which too frequently are overlooked by the thoughtful and serious, and abandoned to political tricksters and time-servers? The rightful authority of government—that authority which, for nearly eighty-five years, has, under the blessing of Almighty God, been giving to this land security, prosperity, and influence, and made its name to be feared and honored abroad—that authority which was established by a lawful opposition to foreign aggression, and by the blood of our illustrious fathers—that authority is to-day contravened and trampled upon. The flag—dear to every patriot—which represents that authority, and is its symbol, as the cross is the symbol of Christianity—the flag which floats alike over the bark which bears to and fro the riches of commerce, and over the peace-freighted vessel which carries to the heathen the noble missionary and the blessed Bible—that flag is dishonored, and in its place the flag of the traitor and the rebel floats boldly and shamelessly in the winds of heaven.

And who are they who are thus defying divinely ordained rulers, and rending the fabric of government as though it were a thing of yesterday? Are they foreign mercenaries, or men of foreign blood and language? No! They are our own kinsmen; one with us in history, blood, and language. Are they the down-trodden

and the oppressed, who claim the right of the oppressed — rebellion under oppression? No! You will all agree with me when I say, that not one act of oppression has been committed against them, which, in the sight of an honest man, yea, more, in the sight of a holy God, can for one moment justify them in pursuing a course which may prove their own destruction, and will prove a source of weeping and lamentation throughout the land for many years to come; a course which will arrest the progress of religion at home, and the work of evangelization abroad. It seems as though the words of God's prophet were dictated with reference to us, so applicable are they to our case: "*The men of thy confederacy have brought thee even to the border: the men that were at peace with thee have deceived thee, and prevailed against thee; they that eat thy bread have laid a wound under thee: there is none understanding in him.*" (Obadiah 7.) Those who now threaten to destroy that government which our fathers have handed down to us as a glorious legacy, are indebted to the Union for the very power which they wield against it. Some of the rebel States were poor territories, purchased mostly with Northern money and Northern blood.

And what do they aim to accomplish? What is the object of their revolt and rebellion? Are they battling for the great principles of human progress and human emancipation? No! They have but one object that we can discern—the overthrow of the national government, for the establishment of their favorite

system, which the national Congress has always refused to extend. They aim at the perpetuation of slavery, a system from which enlightened humanity recoils with abhorrence, and which almost the entire civilized world is repudiating.

Fifty years ago the slave system was viewed by none in a higher light than that of a necessary evil, to be gradually removed. To-day it has, in one section of our country, been lifted to the singularly lofty position of an institution which bears the impress of Jehovah, and bearing such an impress, it must, of course, be extended and perpetuated like other divine institutions.

The word of God itself is eagerly searched—not for the purpose of obtaining individual light on the great truths of redemption—but to obtain, if possible, a warrant for, and a vindication of, this monstrous and odious system. Laws and regulations in the Old Testament, intended to limit an evil then existing, are quoted as though they were of equal force to-day with the Decalogue, which, of all the Levitical laws, alone remains in force under the new dispensation; and counsels in the New Testament, designed to curb and check the evil of Greek and Roman slavery, are cited as though the apostles, and Christ himself, considered slavery man's true and normal condition.

Convinced by those who thus pervert the oracles of God, the South rises up in rebellion against the federal government which has refused to give to this system its official sanction and indorsement, and to-day is putting forth every energy to overthrow and destroy the work of more than fourscore years.

Dear brethren, in such an emergency as this—however great our repugnance to war—can we conscientiously, can we as patriots, ay more, can we as Christians, when we see the arm of the Lord made bare for our defense, and the sword of justice unsheathed, can we demand, “*O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet?*” Can we stay the work of retributive justice, and say, “*Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still?*”

The present is an issue not limited by opposition to slavery. Much as we may be opposed to that system, we are not to oppose it injudiciously, either in the social circle, in the pulpit, or in the field. On that question, we are not to be like those fanatics who have so long dwelt upon it that they can think of nothing else, and who have, strictly speaking, become men of one idea. If that question is to be involved in this struggle, God who “*hath made of one blood all nations of men,*” (Acts 17 : 26,) will so link it with the conflict, that American slavery will forever be abolished. If God does not so order events, let none attempt to go before their Omniscient Guide, and make it the sole point at issue.

But, in the providence of God, we are called upon to be men of one idea, on the great question of the preservation of that Union which began in the prayers of Christian patriots, was established by the divine blessing upon patriot arms, and has been perpetuated by the efforts of a long succession of patriots, against whom no political opposition has hitherto been able to stand.

Shall the sword be quiet? “*How can it be quiet,*

seeing the Lord hath given it a charge against Ashkelon, and against the sea-shore? There hath he appointed it."

Doubtless, God's hand is in this struggle, and he will make our cause his own, if we look to him for help and guidance.

When we contrast the spirit, the motives, and the acts of the two great opposing parties, which now as patriots and as rebels confront each other, can we fail to determine which side will be favored ultimately with the divine blessing? On the one side, we see calm and deliberate action, magnanimity, forbearance, and repugnance to inaugurate the conflict; on the other, fiery zeal, reckless haste, and eagerness to begin the carnage of a war, which promises to be behind none of the wars of history, or of our own day, in its fearful scenes of rapine and bloodshed. On the one side, only that enthusiasm which is the sign of a patriotic spirit, and only that determination which is awakened by the approach of invading foes, or the encroachments of rebel forces; on the other, that frenzy which has been awakened by partisans and demagogues, and that reckless will, which acts out to-day the wild suggestions of yesterday. On the one side, no hatred or ungenerous acts; on the other, deep-rooted animosity, and deeds of cruelty which make Christian men shudder. Do I draw the contrast too strongly? Does not the press of the day—even that portion of it which so long favored our enemies—bear out the parallels? Whence spring feelings so diverse? From what fountain do they flow? Surely, not alike from God. "*Doth a fountain send forth from the same*

place sweet water and bitter?" (James 3 : 11.) No ! brethren. The one side harmonizes with the principles of Christ and of his Gospel ; the other seems only to accord with the spirit of the enemy of souls. The one is likely to be honored with the divine favor ; the other is destined to be stamped and branded with the disapproval of God.

But some one may ask, "Can we not compromise this matter, and avert the fearful consequences of war?" I would that it were possible. But it is all too late. The government, divinely sanctioned and lawfully established, is the repository of a sacred trust, which it has no authority to surrender, or divide with the foe and the rebel. It stands between high heaven and earth, as the civil vicegerent of the Almighty Ruler of Nations, and it dare not betray its trust or bear the sword in vain. It must defend its authority, vindicate its integrity, and maintain its heaven-ordained rights, and that at every hazard. It must speak out as boldly in the time of danger, as in the time of security. Its voice must not die away in forbearance and in compromises, but must thunder in the tones of the camp and of the battle-field in its hour of peril. If its representatives fail to do this, they are unworthy of their trust, and should be superseded by those who will maintain—against every foe—the cause of government, of humanity, of the King of kings.

The day of forbearance and compromise has passed, and the government has spoken. And the people are speaking, too. *Every man must speak.* This is no time

for neutrality. If such a thing ever was possible, it is impossible now. The voice of commerce must be heard speaking for the interests of the nation and of humanity; the scholar and the professional man; the artisan and the agriculturist; the man of daily toils and the man of leisure; ay, and the pulpit too, must speak; and the voice must be no uncertain sound of the trumpet, but one mighty voice, that shall echo throughout the length and breadth of the land, until every soul shall be alive to our danger, and glow with patriotic devotion to that Constitution which is the great charter of our freedom, and with loyal allegiance to the government, which under God is commissioned to save that Constitution from destruction.

But is there no alternative but war, to save our beloved country? As a Christian, as a lover of peace, I would there were. But war seems inevitable. Already it has begun. The clouds are gathering thick about us. The National Capital is threatened by the lawless rebels. The match has been applied to the train, and no human power can extinguish it. God alone can stay the avenging sword, and he will do it when it has accomplished his purposes.

Dreadful as is the alternative, who would not deem it preferable to a perpetual reign of lawlessness and anarchy; with no acknowledged government—no recognition abroad—no work of evangelization carried on—no security at our firesides—no light in the future of our country's history? To-day, war upon our foes is not only justifiable but righteous. Yet in the conflict

there should be no desire to gratify personal revenge ; let no acknowledged public or private rights be interfered with. The cause of our country, and of human freedom, is too noble, too strong a cause to warrant the use of any of those base subterfuges and expedients, which alike merit the reprobation of Christians and of the civilized world. Let the same noble, Christian spirit which animated Washington and his compatriots in the earliest period of our nation's history animate those who engage in this righteous war, and the Lord of Hosts shall be with us. And "*If God be for us, who can be against us ?*" But let none forget that prayer is a mighty weapon. Let that weapon be kept well bur-nished. Christian brethren, that weapon you and I especially are called upon to wield. Let us reverently invoke the God of heaven, from whom cometh every rightful victory, and commend to him the cause of our beloved country. Let us pray that he would continue to bless this heritage of our fathers, which he has so often and so richly blessed. Let us pray for those noble men, who are going forth to meet the foe, that they may be subjects of God's converting grace, and that they may be preserved from the evils so often connected with the camp. Let us pray that these conflicts and tumults may soon be at an end ; and that our government may emerge from the cloud more firmly established than ever before, and be for many generations the bulwark of liberty and the defender of religious and social rights.

If we pray with faith, God will hear us, and the sword will again rest in its scabbard, and the Lord shall

no more give it a charge concerning the sea-shore, nor appoint for it the work of destruction.

But be assured, brethren, that that sword which Omnipotent Justice hath unsheathed, will not return to its scabbard until it has done its work fully and well, and accomplished every purpose of the Mighty One who hath given it a charge. Perhaps not till every oppressed son and daughter of Africa is freed from bondage, and the slave stain removed forever from the nation's character. In all our troubles let us look to God. Let us give our hearts to that Saviour who alone can make us free, and, relying on God, go forth—whether pastor or people—to discharge whatever duties may devolve upon us, as men, as patriots, and as Christians, and victory shall assuredly be ours. For we may confidently rely upon that Almighty arm, which has ever been stretched forth in the cause of truth and freedom, and is not yet shortened that it can not save.

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